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AUTHOR Davison, Fred C.
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ABSTRACT

The speaker indicates problems and prospects affecting the teaching profession and suggests ways higher education can contribute to solving educational problems. Specific recommendations include differentiating staff systems in elementary and secondary schools; reducing the number of teacher training institutions and providing those remaining with increased resources; utilizing higher education resources to address concerns of public education and public school teachers; solving the problems of overspecializing teacher training curricula; and providing incentives to make the teaching profession attractive to good students and capable teachers. (RH)

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The National Forum on Excellence in Education
Remarks by Dr. Fred C. Davison
President of The University of Georgia
at the General Assembly on The Teaching Profession
8 a.m.; December 7, 1983; Indiana Convention Center

I appreciate Secretary Bell's invitation to share this morning's assembly with Governors Graham and Kean, two leaders who are setting the pace in improving teaching and enhancing the teaching profession.

We are at this national forum to form an agenda for action that will address the crisis in education. I fully agree with the National Commission on Excellence in Education that we are in a crisis.

Those who accuse the Commission of dramatic overstatement need only consider the total body of facts available.

Our objective in this forum, and in our national dialogue, should not be to place blame but to correct the problem. The blame and problem belong to all of us.

My role is to comment as president of a comprehensive, research university that offers teacher training programs in 28 areas of concentration at the undergraduate and graduate degree levels. We also conduct extensive research and public service outreach programs, including in-service education for teachers and continuing education in numerous other fields for adults.

Because higher education has these missions, and because we are both producers of teachers and consumers of their products, we share the responsibility for solving the problems faced by education with all citizens, including teachers and administrators in our schools, government officials, business leaders and parents. Of all these, however, higher education perhaps should sound the alarm the loudest.

We in colleges and universities have seen the academic credentials of students applying for admission continue to decline. And we have seen a disproportionate number of students from the low end of the academic spectrum enroll in teacher education programs.

But higher education can only train the individuals sent by school systems, and the quality of those systems is determined largely by the local community.

Students that we in higher education enroll, as well as those students our graduates teach, are the products of the general value system of our society.

Society determines the motivation of our future teachers by the value it places on the teaching profession through salaries paid and total support provided.

Of course, I am speaking in generalizations that do not apply to every school system, every student and every teacher. I am also speaking as the representative of a university whose teacher training programs, in many areas, rank among the best in the nation.

But for the 50 institutions that train teachers in my state, and in the total national picture, the situation is, I think, more negative than positive.

A number of factors have affected the teaching profession in recent years including changes in social values and expectations.

Chief among the problems is that the profession of teaching and education have been downgraded on society's list of priorities and this has led to an inevitable decrease in performance. Society has assigned a monetary value to teaching far below that assigned to other vocations that, in many cases, require no formal education.

Teaching once was the path to community respect, a means of fulfilling high ideals of service and the means to a higher quality of living. This is no longer true.

In the past, many excellent teachers entered the field because other professional opportunities were close to them. Today, increased career mobility for women and minorities in particular diverts many potentially excellent teachers into fields which are perceived to be more prestigious and which are more lucrative.

Sadly, teaching has come to be viewed as a relatively low status occupation with few opportunities for advancement, low salaries, decreased job satisfaction and futility. There are many reasons for this diminished image--poor working conditions, classroom violence, drug abuse, loss of parental support and the rest of a too-familiar litany.

Communities have been unwilling or unable to provide sufficient funding for teacher salaries and educational quality. And the layman, and in many cases the courts, rather than professional educators, usually make the decisions that set education's total direction.

Some good things are happening, though, including what we are part of today.

Secretary Bell and his colleagues have labored long and well to restore education's formerly high position on the agenda of public concerns. This national forum, and the 12 regional meetings that preceded it, have combined with the National Commission's report to mightily increase public awareness of the issues.

Not in recent times has the condition of American education been of such concern to the public at large. Mr. Bell deserves our gratitude for his efforts and our support in keeping education on the front page.

Governors Graham and Kean represent the essential ingredient in effecting educational reform and improvement. For after attention has been drawn to the issues, action must follow.

Both these leaders have made public education a genuine priority in their states and are using the weight of their offices to implement significant increases in support for education.

The public has also received the message that our leaders and educators are talking about more than money. The crisis also requires moral support, individual commitment, recognition of excellence, and nurture and protection of quality.

Higher education can contribute directly to the solution as well. From my experience in higher education, let me make some suggestions.

First is the observation that standards and performance are inextricably tied together. There is no way to raise the latter without increasing the former. For this reason, which to me is not debatable, our attention must turn to standards at every level.

The heart and soul of every great college or university is the extreme care given to the promotion and rewarding of its faculty. An improved system, whether it be the master teacher concept or some other, will be essential to the solution of our dilemma in K through twelve. Perhaps our colleges and universities can provide the model and methods for the implementation of the concept of a differentiated staff system for our public schools.

Universities recognize the individual strengths of faculty members and make assignments accordingly. Teaching, supervision, paperwork, research and administrative tasks are not assigned universally to all faculty.

Higher education identifies the best teachers and supports and recognizes them for that work. It matches the required type of work to the individual who can best do the work. Teachers in elementary and secondary schools, on the other hand, tend to be assigned the same tasks in the same proportion whether they have one year or 21 years of experience.

Granted, these non-teaching tasks are essential. But support staff can and should be provided to perform some of these duties. And differentiation can be made between teachers as well.

The best teachers in our public schools should be left free to teach and should be rewarded financially for doing that job well. Some fear that differentiated staff systems will create problems in evaluation and favoritism. I submit that such a system is so much better than what we have now that it deserves our best energy and attention to make it work properly.

It works well in our colleges and universities.

Advancement is based on evaluations of an individual's efforts, abilities and success achieved. Time in service is a low priority factor in the promotion systems of first-class universities except as it defines up-or-out limits.

Second, I believe that we have diluted our resources by spreading them too thinly among too many institutions of higher education and too great a variety of teacher training programs

We should decrease the number of teacher training institutions and concentrate budget and personnel resources in centers of excellence. Where there are 50 institutions offering training, perhaps there should be only ten.

These ten programs should get the best libraries, the best faculty members and the best laboratories and equipment to produce the well-training teachers we need. This kind of concentration of resources will enable stronger and more effective links to be established between higher education and our school systems.

Third, we must bring higher education's expertise more directly to bear on solving specific problems and providing more individual assistance to public schools and public school teachers.

Fourth, over-specialization resulting in a proliferation of the number of program areas taught is a problem, in my view. Specialization grew out of a perceived need within our school systems but these programs have grown beyond that need.

For example, in Georgia the 14 state supported institutions of higher education that train teachers offer 338 separate programs. My own university sponsors 28 areas of concentration ranging from art education to vocational education.

These programs have become duplicative and in many cases redundant. A student is required to select a subject major and planned teaching level immediately upon college enrollment, insuring a pressure situation which is discouraging and often counterproductive.

I suggest that intensive specialization in teacher education programs has hindered students' opportunities to gain a more important general education. There has been widespread criticism that colleges of education require too many professional or methods courses, and not enough emphasis on the specific academic discipline to be taught. I tend to agree.

Fifth, incentives for good teachers must exist both within the education process as well as within the career track.

A new program in Georgia provides loans of $1,500 yearly to college juniors and seniors who declare majors in science and math. A year's loan is forgiven for each year the graduate teaches in one of these fields.

This program will help attract good students to the teaching profession, students whose high motivation marks them as potentially excellent teachers.

Much of what I have said parallels the conclusions of the Commission on Excellence, the National Science Board and other concerned groups and individuals.

To summarize, it is clear that career incentives and teacher salaries must be increased to attract good students into teacher training programs. Teachers must be given support and respect as individuals whose work, more than any other group, directly affects the nation's future.

Specific strengths must be cultivated among teachers, and those strengths recognized and rewarded. Institutions of higher education must use their resources to better support the teacher and the education system.

Education and the teaching profession must remain high on the public agenda, and substantive actions must be taken by our elected officials and supported by citizens at large.

Higher education understands that it has an obligation to find solutions that will correct educational deficiencies.

Every sector must work together toward goals of quality.

I believe we know the answers to our problems. We need only the will power to implement those answers.

I believe we can and will return American education to the level of quality that has made it the envy of the entire world. I believe we can regain our lost momentum.

We will do this because we must do it.

For the sake of our children's future and our national survival, we must not squander our time or splinter our effort.

Through our combined commitment, we will succeed.

Thank you.